

Responses to “Why Aren’t Our Kids in Shul?”

Dr. Benzion Sorotzkin Responds

■ In his article “Why Aren’t Our Kids in Shul?” (summer 2011), Rabbi Dr. Jay Goldmintz writes the following:

One of the most powerful pieces of research I have read on the subject is from studies done on church attendance: “Most children regard worship as uninteresting and boring, nevertheless, it is the children who have been regularly involved in it who are more likely to retain the habit of church attendance when free to abandon it” [Kenneth Hyde, Religion in Childhood and Adolescence: A Comprehensive Review of the Research (Birmingham, Alabama, 1990), 11-12]. In other words. . . those adults who end up attending services on their own are those who went as children even though they didn’t want to. Simply put: the more you force your child to go to shul, the more likely it is that he or she will continue to go to shul later in life.

It’s hard to imagine any contemporary educator stating that forcing children to go to shul will make it more likely that they will continue going as adults. Years of research on cognitive dissonance and self-determination theory, to say nothing about the experiences of countless educators, point to the exact opposite: Children who are forced to attend shul are the ones who are most likely to abandon shul as soon as they are on their own.

Rabbi Goldmintz’s quote from Hyde’s book is taken from the preface and isn’t describing any specific research. There is no statement anywhere else in the 400-plus-page book that advocates forcing children to attend worship services. In fact, Hyde writes (p. 232), “Only ineffectual parents used the strategy of children being threatened with punishment by God for bad behavior to enhance their power to control their children. Its effect was to produce compliance rather than an internalization of values. . .” He then concludes (p. 254): “The principal determinant for church attendance was parental attendance and parental

religious values.” There is no mention of forced attendance.

Hyde’s basic statement is really nothing more than common sense. Those who enjoy playing tennis as adults are more likely to have done so as children than those who don’t. That doesn’t mean that if you force your child to play tennis he will be more likely to continue playing when he’s older!

The importance of avoiding coercion in *chinuch* is also emphasized in Torah literature. The Shlah Hakadosh (*Parashat Vayetzei* 31:5) writes that when someone wants something done by his family members, it isn’t advis-

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able to impose his will—even if he has authority over them. Rather he should try to influence them in a manner that will bring them to want it themselves.

When we make harsh demands of our children, our values don’t become internalized. This is an important principle in *chinuch*.

Dr. Benzion Sorotzkin is a clinical psychologist who works with adolescents and adults in Brooklyn, New York.

Rabbi Daniel Rockoff Responds

■ Rabbi Goldmintz’s comments are right on target. Teens may not be hard-wired to enjoy the meditative communal aspects of *tefillah* in shul, but making sure their experiences are positive and meaningful is essential if we want to see them in shul.

Typically, after completion of the Bar and Bat Mitzvah experience, a child’s sense of purpose wears off. The bright-eyed child who enthusiastically accepted the yoke of *mitzvot* quickly morphs into a questioning, contrarian adolescent.

A teen minyan allows teens to take on leadership roles as well as observe role models whom they can learn from.

A teen minyan also creates a venue where positive peer pressure can encourage teens to participate in shul. “Cool” leaders, parent volunteers and a great *kiddush* go a long way too.

Smaller shuls in communities such as ours in Overland Park, Kansas, that do not have the population to support a teen minyan use other means to get teens involved. As Rabbi Goldmintz stresses, parents remain the most profound role models in this area.

Other types of role models can be instrumental as well. Often the rabbi, *rebbeztin* or another adult can actively engage teens, especially those without a parent on their side of the *mechitzah*, by sitting with them and gently guiding them. Conversely, the best way to learn is to teach others. Teens themselves can serve as role models for younger children, either by assisting a younger “buddy” or serving as a youth leader for Shabbat morning groups.

At our shul, we actively involve teens by having them lead the *davening*, read the Torah, and participate in the services in other ways. It is also important to remember that our confidence follows our competence. Young adults must be comfortable with the *siddur*, with the tunes, and with reading Hebrew. We must all take responsibility for ensuring that children have these skills.

Rabbi Daniel Rockoff is rabbi of Beth Israel Abraham Voliner (BIAV) in Overland Park, Kansas.

Rabbi Ron Yitzchok Eisenman Responds

■ A young man once came to a *rav* for advice. The man was having difficulties deciding if a girl was the “right one.” The *rav* asked, “You are very concerned about the woman being the ‘right one’; however, what about yourself? Are *you* the right one?”

Perhaps instead of asking why kids do not come to shul, we should be asking ourselves, “Why are *we* coming to shul?” Even if we are physically in shul, are we emotionally in shul?

How many of us can claim that we are in shul on time and that we stay fo-

cused on the *davening*? How many of us can claim that when we leave shul we feel spiritually rejuvenated?

How many of us look forward to shul on Shabbat as the highlight of the week?

Prayer is a lifelong struggle. It is hard when we are nine-years-old and hard when we are ninety-years-old. Why, then, do I (and most of us) come to shul?

We go to shul for the same reason we go to work and the gym and anyplace else we may not initially want to go; we go because in our world outlook it is the *right thing* to do, notwithstanding the fact that each individual prayer experience may be difficult.

Perhaps thirty or forty years ago, children were less defiant and less independent. Today, however, with the pro-

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liferation of our “feel-good” lifestyle and our “warm-and-fuzzy Judaism,” it is not surprising that kids feel more empowered to stay home. For them, it is not yet “the right thing” to do.

However, I am not pessimistic. Why? I recall over thirty years ago when I was a dorm counselor at Yeshiva University, and Rabbi Yosef Blau, the *mashgiach*, spoke to us about the alarming number of boys who were not coming to *davening* on Shabbat. He discussed with us what, if anything, there was to do about it.

I no longer recall if the policies helped. However, my hunch tells me that most of those “boys” are now men who are in shul on Shabbat and they are grappling with their own children’s shul attendance.

Many young women today help out in the kitchen less than girls did years ago; however, when these young women become wives and mothers, they magically become efficient *ba’ala-bustahs*!

Therefore, let us not despair; once these young men become husbands and fathers, they will be found in shul on Shabbat morning along with the rest of us. My rabbinic hunch tells me that today’s AWOL young man will be tomorrow’s shul president.

Rabbi Ron Yitzchok Eisenman is rabbi of Congregation Ahavas Israel in Pasaic Park, New Jersey.

Rabbi Hershel Billet Responds

■ In his insightful essay, Rabbi Goldmintz describes a problem which our community has not made enough of an effort to solve. At an early age, our children are presented with their first *siddur* with great fanfare in the presence of their teachers, principals, and family members. The snacks distributed at the “*siddur* party” add to the sweetness of the moment. But after the Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebration, the excitement has dissipated and the sweet taste has long

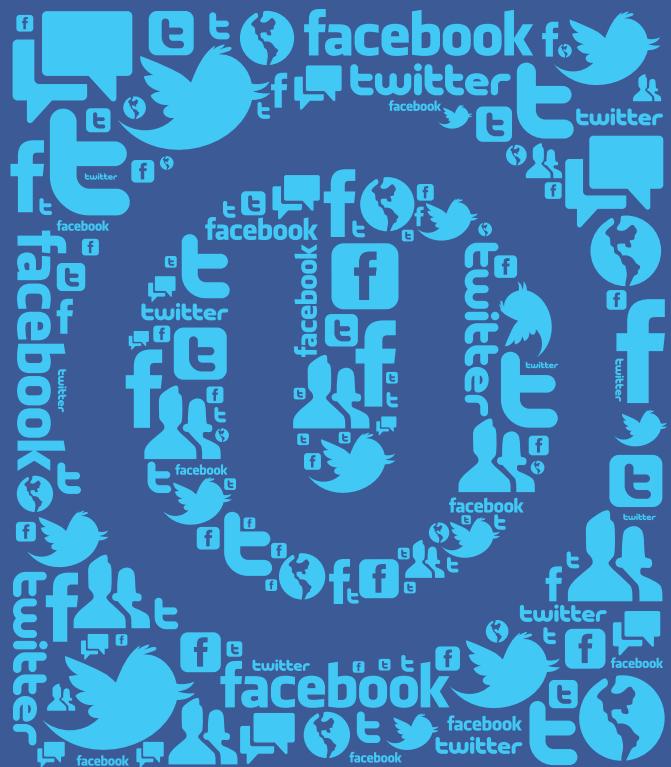
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left their systems. For some children, after elementary school or junior high school the synagogue becomes, at best, a social center on Shabbat and holidays. Many see the synagogue as a place of worship only after their year in Israel or if they become active members of the religious Jewish community on their college campuses.

Is it possible to bring our junior high and high school students back into the sanctuary for serious Divine service? Rabbi Goldmintz accurately describes the possible causes of our kids' disinterest: hormones, length of the service, lack of comprehension of the prayer book, irrelevance of the service, poor parental role models, et cetera. In addition, most teenagers do not confront the human condition with all of its ferocity and helplessness as responsible adults must. Some teenagers have not yet developed the sophistication to relate to prayer as a useful medium on a practical and philosophical level. For this generation, if only one could pray on Facebook or Twitter or send God an e-mail, things might be easier. Perhaps that is why Steve Jobs was summoned to Heaven.

I have long been a believer in a partnership between parents, schools, and synagogues. Ultimately, parents are responsible for their children—not the yeshivah! Not the synagogue! But it is wrong for schools or shuls to cop such a plea. Each should play a complementary role in the spiritual development of our children. I know a junior high school principal who asked parents to practice reading the Amidah with their children. He received hostile responses from many parents who said that the school was being remiss in its duty by asking the parents to play a role in their kids' spiritual well-being!

We must try a partnership project between parents, schools, and shuls. Since kids respond best to situations that combine food and social interaction, perhaps these draws can be used to lure them to the synagogue. For example, rotating youth committees could be formed that will meet during the week to plan the after-service *kiddush*, arrange menus, purchase supplies, prepare various dishes, et cetera; those involved will feel responsibility for the success of the venture and come

to shul. Youth committees could also meet during the week to give out the roles of the *ba'alei tefillah* and *ba'alei keriah*. Young women could prepare stimulating questions to be asked before each *aliyah* and deliver the *divrei Torah* at the conclusion of the minyan. These committees could also help plan the melodies to be used by the *ba'alei tefillah*, making shul time more enjoyable through communal singing of songs that young people like and connect to.

In addition, if a steering committee consisting of educators, rabbis, synagogue lay members and parents could be created to devise a uniform curriculum in prayer for grades one through twelve that would involve every child's family and the cooperation of every synagogue (including the regular adult minyanim, the junior congregations and high school minyanim), perhaps change is possible. Part of the program would involve teaching the meaning of the prayers. Perhaps by creating and using an abbreviated *siddur* with essential prayers only, to be used in conjunction with "relevant" programs and appropriate treats or a *kiddush*, our teenagers can be brought out of the synagogue halls and into the sanctuary.

Rabbi Hershel Billet is rabbi of the Young Israel of Woodmere in New York.

Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb Responds

■ When reflecting back on my years at Congregation Shomrei Emunah in Baltimore, I am struck by the fact that our experience was, on the one hand, fundamentally dissimilar to that described by Rabbi Goldmintz, and yet, the concern he expressed was painfully familiar.

As far as I was aware, the overwhelming majority of our teens attended shul on a weekly basis. Yet, even with most teens in shul every Shabbat, the challenges of meaningful *tefillah*, spiritual motivation, and proper decorum were issues that we, like other communities, certainly confronted.

The difficulties teens have with *davening* are actually very similar to the problems adults face. For a large percentage of the Orthodox community—including the yeshivah and semi-

nary educated among us—*tefillah* is the weakest link in their religious observance. Difficulty relating to the text of the *siddur*, an emotional disconnect from God, and an inability to maintain concentration for the (typically) lengthy Shabbat morning *davening* are all issues that confront adults as well as teens.

The unfortunate reality is that in every synagogue there are people who attend week after week for reasons that have very little to do with serious *avodah she'balev*. Just "showing up" is important, but it is clearly insufficient. Lack of shul attendance, while troubling, is not *the* problem; it is a symptom—among others—of the deeper problem of spiritual alienation.

It is also important to acknowledge that shuls are generally no more than the "third line of defense" behind the home and school. Nevertheless, I believe a shul can and should play a meaningful role in the religious development of our children.

In Shomrei Emunah, we were able to develop numerous programs aimed at enhancing the *tefillah* experience of our youth, including a weekly teen minyan and *Seudah Shelishit* program, both of which focus on the teenagers' unique needs and, at the same time, empower them to take responsibility for the quality of their spiritual experience. Additionally, the main Minchah minyan on Shabbat afternoon is beautifully led every week by the teens, and at least once a year the entire Shabbat morning *davening* is run by the youth. We thus tried to strike a balance between focusing on the teens apart from the adults and, at the same time, making them feel a part of the overall shul community.

Much more needs to be said, but the bottom line is this: A lot of teenagers feel alienated from *tefillah* and, like many adults, this remains a very real challenge even if they attend shul regularly. We must make it a communal priority to educate and inspire our children about the beauty of *davening* and the privilege of talking to Hashem.

Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb is the former rabbi of Congregation Shomrei Emunah in Baltimore, Maryland. Since making *aliyah* in 2010, Rabbi Gottlieb has taught at various *yeshivot*.

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